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The Libyan Intervention and its Broader Implications

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The United States' intervention in Libya in 2011 is a prime example of the pitfalls states can fall victim to when they stray from the well-traveled road of caution and restraint. What starts out as a mission with the goal of helping the local population often ends up hurting it. For instance, the Gaddafi regime was disliked worldwide. Gaddafi had been oppressing his people since he took power in 1969, and sponsored acts of terrorism around the world. Pan Am Flight 103, the La Belle disco bombing, Pan Am Flight 73--a list of state-sponsored acts of terror left Gaddafi with an even longer list of enemies globally. In 2011, after 42 years, the international community was itching for new leadership in Libya, and the United States thought it had a chance to accelerate that process. The Arab Spring, the subsequent uprising in Libya, and the inevitable violent crackdown by Gaddafi's forces created a fork in the road. On the one hand, the United States and its allies could continue straight ahead on the well-traveled path: horror, then disgust, followed merely by condemnation. This popular response rarely, if ever, changes the status quo, and we must be concerned with the long-term effect of responses. Alternatively, the United States could swerve off the road down the path of a stronger reaction. However, stronger reactions provoke even stronger, often unexpected, consequences.

President Barack Obama decided to take the gamble and swerve off the well-traveled road, hoping that the stronger consequence would be the ushering in of an era of peace and democracy in Libya. Explaining his

reasoning for intervening, the President declared, "We know that if we [] waited one more day, Benghazi

stained the conscience of the world.” Two days later, the U.S. and its allies established a no-fly zone and began bombing Gaddafi’s forces in support of the rebels. Within seven months, the rebels conquered the country, and shot Gaddafi dead. Almost akin to Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” gaffe in 2003, the Obama administration immediately declared victory. Emulating Julius Caesar’s “Veni, vidi, vici” (“I came; I saw; I conquered”), Secretary Clinton declared, “We came, we saw, he died.” President Obama vaunted in the Rose Garden, “Without putting a single U.S. service member on the ground, we achieved our objectives.” Even scholarly articles were quickly published with intros such as “NATO’s operation in Libya has rightly been hailed as a model intervention.”

It was too good to be true. Alan Kuperman, an Associate Professor at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs here at the University of Texas at Austin, describes the grand scale of the failure, “Libya has not only failed to evolve into a democracy; it has devolved into a failed state. Violent deaths and other human rights abuses have increased severalfold.” The United States did not just worsen the situation on the ground for the Libyan people, it failed to escape unscathed itself. The failed state fostered an environment ripe for the cultivation and protection of terrorist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and ISIS, striking at the core U.S. interest: homeland security. President Obama’s deviation produced the worst outcome possible. Had the United States stuck to the usual policy of non-intervention, there is a good chance that Gaddafi’s large military would have crushed the uprising, or at least secured the populated areas. Security under a dictatorship is always preferable to anarchy and terrorism.

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